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**More inequality, fewer class differences: The paradox of attitudes to redistribution across European countries**

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(Article begins on next page)

## **More inequality, fewer class differences.**

### **The paradox of attitudes to redistribution across European countries**

#### **Abstract**

This article investigates how income inequality affects class differences in attitudes to redistribution. Drawing on the fourth wave (2008-09) of the European Values Study, it provides a multilevel analysis covering 44 nations. The main finding is that class differences in attitudes to redistribution tend to fade out in more unequal countries, not because higher classes converge toward more pro-redistributive positions, but because working class people become less egalitarian. This result proved to be robust with respect to several checks and to the inclusion of different control variables, both economic and non-economic. The interpretation of these puzzling findings points to the role of various societal and cultural factors, such as social mobility, political discourse and individualistic values.

**Keywords:** attitudes to redistribution; class; income inequality; European Values Study; comparative research; multilevel analysis.

#### **Introduction**

The importance of class position for a variety of outcomes such as education (Breen and Jonsson 2005), income (Goldthorpe and McKnight 2010, Weeden, Kim, Di Carlo et al. 2007), health (Marmot and Wilkinson 2005) and voting (Clark and Lipset 2001, Evans 1999), to mention but a few, has been stressed by a large body of research, despite recurrent claims about the end of class and class politics (see Weakliem and Adams 2011 for a discussion). At the heart of the class concept is its capacity to

summarize an individual's exposure to economic risks and life chances, much more than income or social status would do (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992 ch. 2, Goldthorpe 2000 ch. 10). That is why class has been deemed an important predictor of various policy related attitudes, some of the most prominent being redistributive issues (Svallfors 2006). The link between an individual's class and his/her material interest makes it quite obvious to relate class and attitudes to redistribution, on the grounds that self-interest in redistribution is well captured by class position.

Increasingly, the bulk of current research on redistribution and welfare attitudes has taken a comparative approach, emphasizing income inequality as a relevant macro level feature (e.g. Dallinger 2010, Dion and Birchfield 2010, Finseraas 2009, Jaeger 2013, Schmidt-Catran 2014). The theoretical literature, however, offers contrasting predictions about the impact of class across different societal contexts. When proposed models focus on specific features such as income inequality, they disregard class as a micro level factor, referring rather to individual income and skill specificity (Cusack, Iversen and Rehm 2006, Iversen and Soskice 2001, Meltzer and Richard 1981). Therefore, only indirect suggestions can be drawn from such models. Other kinds of theorization (Edlund 2007, Svallfors 1997, Svallfors 2006, Svallfors 2007), influenced by welfare regime scholars (Castles and Mitchell 1992, Esping-Andersen 1990, Korpi and Palme 1998), paid explicit attention to class cleavages, but on the other hand they did not focus specifically on income inequality as distinct from other country or regime level characteristics, treating them often as a whole. Thus, it is difficult to clearly predict a specific effect of inequality on class differences in attitudes. This can be one reason why comparative research on attitudes to redistribution has not yet reached a consensus on the importance of class across contexts characterized by different levels of inequality. The explanations for the findings that have emerged so far might also require further consideration.

This article contributes to the comparative literature on class, income inequality and attitudes to redistribution by providing an analysis covering a quite large and differentiated sample of countries (N=44). Unlike previous studies, this analysis includes many non-EU countries, mainly from the

former socialist bloc, and a wider range of inequality levels. Also, while almost all studies are based on European Social Survey (ESS) or International Social Survey Program (ISSP) data, this article analyzes data from the European Values Study (EVS), thus providing evidence from a data source other than those that are commonly used.

The main finding is that class differences in attitudes to redistribution tend to fade out with growing inequality, and this is not because higher classes converge toward more pro-redistributive positions, but because working class people become less egalitarian. This result proved to be robust with respect to several checks and to the inclusion of different control variables, both economic and non-economic. The interpretation of these puzzling findings points to the role of various societal and cultural factors, such as social mobility, political discourse, and individualistic values.

The next section sets the theoretical framework that guided the analysis, followed by a brief review of the most relevant empirical studies. The aim of the study and the research hypotheses are then stated. The fourth section describes data and method. The fifth section presents the results, which are discussed in the last section, where a few possible explanations of the puzzle are reviewed.

## **Theoretical background**

The literature acknowledged that the concept of redistribution has two related but not overlapping meanings: redistribution as *income equalization* and redistribution as *public insurance* against economic risks (Iversen and Soskice 2001, Moene and Wallerstein 2001). The way redistribution is considered has consequences on individual level explanations of attitude to (or demand for) redistribution. Theory has focused primarily on self-interest as the major factor, though other factors such as political ideology (Feldman and Zaller 1992), beliefs about social mobility and the causes of poverty and economic success (Alesina and Angeletos 2005, Benabou and Ok 2001, Fong 2001,

Piketty 1995), social identity (Lindqvist and Östling 2011, Shayo 2009) or basic human values (Kulin and Svallfors 2013) have also been considered. In the following, I concentrate on self-interest, as it is more relevant when considering class as an individual level variable, though I will consider a few of the other factors that are not related to self-interest when discussing the robustness of my empirical findings.

From the perspective of redistribution as income equalization, according to the influential and often-cited article by Meltzer and Richard (1981), an individual's income is the best indicator of self-interest. Under their model's assumptions, high-income people have more to lose and less to gain from redistributive policy than low-income people because their contribution to taxes financing redistribution is greater than their net benefit (see, for a critique, Kenworthy and Pontusson 2005, Kenworthy and McCall 2008, Lübker 2004). Thus, people's self-interest should be captured by their current income. More complex models in the political economy literature recognized that, under particular circumstances, even the poor could oppose redistribution if they can realistically hope that they (or their children) will become rich in the future, given that public decisions about taxation usually have lasting effects after they are made. Because of risk aversion, however, the hope of income improvement is likely to be dominated by the desire for social insurance (Benabou and Ok 2001).

This calls the meaning of redistribution as public insurance into question. From this perspective, the risk of fluctuations in future income is a better indicator of self-interest, and occupation is seen as the source of an individual's exposure to economic risks. This is the reason why many sociologists and some political scientists attach much emphasis to the concept of class, rather than income. The former, as defined by occupational situation and employment relations, is better at capturing an individual's position as regards various economic risks such as poverty, income volatility, unemployment, etc. (Brooks and Svallfors 2010, Chan and Goldthorpe 2007, Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992, Goldthorpe 1987, Svallfors 2007). From this point of view, the strongest supporters of redistribution as public

insurance would be the social groups who are its actual or potential beneficiaries. Blue-collar and low level white-collar employees would be more supportive of redistribution because they usually benefit from redistributive policies in the form of income transfers, unemployment insurance and so on.<sup>1</sup>

Although the relationship between income and class as indicators of self-interest is not straightforward (Rehm, Hacker and Schlesinger 2012), economically privileged and economically secure groups do normally overlap to a large extent and the sociological concept of class, based on occupation, is particularly apt at capturing economic advantage and economic security. An individual's class should provide him/her with reasons for demanding either more or less redistribution, in both meanings of this concept. People in lower social classes, for instance, since they generally earn incomes below the mean, should favor redistribution because they would receive a net benefit from income equalization policies. At the same time, and perhaps more importantly, they should demand more redistribution because they are more exposed to economic risks that social policies can insure against.

Besides self-interest and the other micro level factors, the literature has also dealt with societal features that can affect attitudes to redistribution, both directly and through their moderating effects on individual level variables. One of the macro characteristics considered by the literature is income inequality, which is relevant from different theoretical perspectives that, however, do not provide unanimous predictions<sup>2</sup>. According to the Meltzer-Richard model mentioned above, if inequality in

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<sup>1</sup> According to Iversen and Soskice's model (2001), one specific mechanism why blue-collar workers should be more supportive of redistribution is that in the occupations where they are usually found, they apply specific skills (i.e., valuable only to a single firm or group of firms) that are not easily portable to other jobs. In the event of unemployment, their need for income support is greater because they lack general skills that can be useful in finding a new job.

<sup>2</sup> Theory about macro level features is much larger than that reviewed here. I focused on approaches having more direct implications for class differences in attitudes. For other perspectives, dealing especially with social justice norms and views about inequality, see, among others, Janmaat (2013), Aalberg (2003), Kluegel et al. (1995).

market incomes increases, so does the demand for redistribution because the share of the population below the mean will be larger.<sup>3</sup> Hence, more citizens (i.e., voters) have an interest in income redistribution. At the same time, greater income inequality should attenuate the effect of individual income on the demand for redistribution because richer people have less compelling reasons to be against redistribution. Moreover, concerns about societal conflict or political instability might induce high income people to support redistribution in highly unequal societies (Alesina and Perotti 1996, Dion and Birchfield 2010). In more equal countries, conversely, the burden of redistribution weighs more on high income people who consequently have greater motivation to be against redistribution (Dallinger 2010, Dion and Birchfield 2010).

Insofar as class and income are correlated, similar considerations could apply to the effect of class in countries with different levels of income inequality. Where (post-tax) income is more equally distributed, more reasons arise for the upper classes to be against redistributive policies or further redistribution, whereas in more unequal nations the need for income equalization is more widespread and hence less class-specific. This holds true primarily for the first meaning of redistribution and for class as a proxy of income, but it should be borne in mind that redistribution is also public insurance and that class also captures exposure to economic risk, not only income.

The literature originating from welfare state studies treated the relevance of income inequality for class differences in attitudes in a different way. First, it must be noted that income inequality is seldom considered alone, but more often in conjunction with other variables (social protection benefits, labor market regulation, and so) that characterize a regime, i.e., an ideal-typical “package” of institutional arrangements. In fact, apart from a few exceptions (e.g., Jaeger 2006, Stegmueller, Scheepers, Rossteutscher et al. 2012), the macro level in empirical research is captured through dummy variables representing a country’s belonging to a broad and fixed regime type (a cluster of nations) (Arts and

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<sup>3</sup> Income distributions are typically right skewed, so there is a majority of citizens who earn incomes below the mean and would gain from flat rate taxation on income whose revenues are redistributed among all.

Gelissen 2001, Linos and West 2003, Svallfors 1997, Taylor-Gooby 2001). Second, from this perspective, inequality is not simply an indicator of the distribution of income, but (also) represents *the visible effect of redistributive institutions*. This point relates to a key concept of this literature, that of *institutional* (or policy) *feedback* that reverses the traditional, bottom-up, relationship between citizens' interests/preferences and state policies (Jordan 2013). This concept conveys the idea that welfare institutions not only set constraints and opportunities for social actors, but can also generate and reproduce their own legitimacy, influencing "individuals' perceptions about what their interests are, whether their representatives are protecting those interests, who their allies might be and what political strategies are promising" (Pierson 1993:621, see also Rothstein 1998). The universal and encompassing character of welfare institutions in social democratic regimes builds cross-class coalitions in favor of the welfare state, whereas the selective (or targeting) and residual character of welfare institutions in liberal regimes gets support only from the small group of their actual or potential beneficiaries. On the one hand, then, income inequality should be associated with less support for redistribution in general, and on the other hand it should exacerbate the class differences in attitudes. One should thus expect the strength of the association between class and attitudes to be greater in much less egalitarian countries such as the UK or US than in Sweden or Norway, which are much more egalitarian.

It is clear that this interpretation contrasts sharply with that proposed by political economists and sociologists following Meltzer and Richard's theorization. However, the institutional feedback approach was also given a quite different interpretation leading to predictions that are more consonant with the standard political economy models. Edlund (2007, see also Kumlin and Svallfors 2007, Svallfors 2006) proposed that the focus be shifted from considering the dimension of universalism vs. selectivity of welfare policies, as in Korpi and Palme's analysis (1998), to the role of "institutional translators" (political parties, unions, and organized interests having a stake in welfare policies) in framing public debate, in addition to the redistributive character of the tax system and the distributive



profile of public spending and risk protection. His analysis thus merges the concepts of institutional (or policy) feedback and *political articulation* – i.e., the way a political issue is framed in public debate – and argues that “the institutional setup of the social democratic welfare regime has a much sharper class profile than the liberal welfare regime” (p. 43). In other words, it is more likely that citizens of social democratic welfare states perceive redistributive and social protection policies as class relevant because their institutional environment suggests that they are. Class differences in attitudes can thus be expected to be more prominent in social democratic regimes or, to use empirically grounded terms, in countries with low income inequality and encompassing welfare policy.

### **Comparative evidence from previous studies and research hypotheses**

In the vast empirical literature on attitudes to redistribution and, more generally, social policies or “welfare attitudes”, relatively few studies are specifically concerned with a comparative analysis of class effects. The author who has investigated this topic most extensively is Svallfors and his associates. In one of his first analyses (Svallfors 1997) based on 1992 ISSP data, he compared four nations with different welfare regimes and levels of inequality, finding that class differences in attitudes are quite similar across Norway, Germany, and Australia, and only slightly stronger in the US. Subsequently, Linos and West (2003) replicated Svallfors’ analysis showing that, with improved model specification and handling of missing values, class counted more in US and Australia than in Norway and Germany, although the differences did not seem dramatic.

In an effort to discern the mechanisms underlying class differences in attitudes, Brooks and Svallfors (2010) compared four Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden), where differences between classes are well-established (see also Svallfors 2004). In line with expectations suggested by

conventional assumptions of class analysis, they found that material interest indicators explain much of the association of class with attitudes. By contrast, they found little support for the alternative hypothesis that the effect of class is due to occupational self-selection by people with different values.

The comparative scope was enlarged in Kumlin and Svallfors's analysis (2007) based on 15 countries from the 2002 European Social Survey. Here they modelled the relationship between class, attitudes, and income inequality, finding a negative relationship between class differences and inequality, which they interpreted as an outcome of the policy feedback mechanism. However, it should be noted that the inclusion of some measures of political articulation in their model did not change their results much.

Jaeger (2006) analyzed two waves (2002 and 2004) of the ESS in 13 countries covering conservative (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg), liberal (Switzerland, Great Britain), Nordic (Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway) and southern Mediterranean (Spain, Portugal, Greece) welfare regimes. Since his focus is on regime effects, he did not address the variance of the effect of class across countries. Nonetheless, his analysis includes class as a micro level variable and results confirm the expected relationship between class and attitudes to redistribution in both waves of the survey. Of course, this is an average effect that does not make it possible to assess differences between countries or to gauge the extent of the variance of class effects since his model did not allow for random slopes.

Finally, Andersen and Curtis (2015) provided an analysis, based on various waves of World Values Survey data in 24 countries, that shares some points of contact with the present one. They specifically focus on the changing impact of class as a function of income inequality. They found that the effect of class on attitude is as hypothesized (i.e., inversely related to policy preferences for government intervention) but decreases with income inequality, a finding they interpret in light of the Meltzer-Richard theoretical model. However, their dependent variable does not refer directly to income

redistribution and actually its correlation with the one used here is zero or very low<sup>4</sup>. Another difference with my analysis is that Andersen and Curtis do not take into account a few macro-economic variables such as social protection expenditures and unemployment rate that might affect macro level results. Moreover, although their data cover non-European countries, many Eastern former socialist countries are not included.

The evidence reviewed so far indicates that class exerts an effect on attitudes to redistribution and related policy attitudes, but does not make clear to what extent the effect of class is generalizable to a large and differentiated sample of countries, characterized by different levels of income inequality as well as other macro level features. The contribution presented here attempts to reinforce and extend the comparative evidence on the relationship between class and attitudes to redistribution using a fairly differentiated sample of countries (N = 44) and focusing on how the effect of class changes with income inequality at country level. In doing so, I paid attention to several possible macro level confounding factors that might alter the impact of income inequality on class differences. In particular, I considered economic growth and prosperity, on the grounds that inequality might lose relevance as material concerns become increasingly less urgent (Blekesaune 2007). I considered unemployment, since a rising level of unemployment in the population entails growing income inequality (Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003). I took into account social protection expenditures to represent the size of welfare institutions that might counteract the effect of inequality (Jaeger 2006). Finally, for reasons explained later, I further controlled the relationship between class differences and inequality for a few (country-level) non-economic factors such as beliefs in the causes of poverty, interpersonal trust and ethnic fractionalization.

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<sup>4</sup> The item used by these authors is a choice along a 1-10 scale where 1 means “People should take more responsibility to provide for themselves” and 10 means “The government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for”. Since this item was also fielded in EVS, it was possible to calculate the correlation with the item analyzed in this article.

To summarize, in the following I test three hypotheses: 1) individuals in higher classes have less egalitarian attitudes than individuals in lower classes; 2) the effect of class varies across countries; 3) income inequality at country level affects class differences in attitudes.

## **Data and Method**

The data for this study come from the fourth wave (2008-09) of the European Values Study (EVS), a collection of ex-ante harmonized cross-country surveys. My analysis covers 44 out of 47 available countries in EVS: Great Britain and Northern Ireland were pooled together as UK; Northern Cyprus and Kosovo were excluded for lack of macro level variables. The comparative scope thus covers the European Union and non-EU countries, mainly from the former socialist bloc, which are not covered by other surveys such as ESS or ISSP<sup>5</sup>.

The question devised in EVS to measure attitudes toward redistribution asked respondents to take a position on a 1-10 scale whose extreme points are two opposite statements: “Incomes should be made more equal” (1) vs. “There should be greater incentives for individual effort” (10). In practice, respondents had to place themselves on a continuum between an egalitarian stance and a meritocratic stance (the latter meaning a close correspondence between contributions and rewards). Although not previously used in studies about class attitudes, this question was already employed in analyses on attitudes to redistribution by Blekesaune (2007) and by Wright and Reeskens (2013). The latter authors also cross-validated this item with a comparable and more often used question drawn from the European Social Survey (“the government should take measures to reduce differences in income

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<sup>5</sup> The sample includes all the European Union nations (28) and the following other countries: Albania, Azerbaijan, Bosnia Herzegovina, Belarus, Georgia, Iceland, Norway, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine.

levels) and did not find evidence of consistent measurement bias in the EVS items. Moreover, it is conceivable that framing the question in terms of semantic oppositions can help interviewees to answer more consciously, discouraging inattentively chosen neutral or “mildly agree” answer options. The opposition between the two sentences highlights the trade-off between income equality, which implies more redistribution and consequently more taxation, and reward for individual effort, which requires lowering taxation to provide more scope for monetary individual incentives.

At the micro level, the focal independent variable capturing individuals’ interest in redistribution is class position, measured according to the European Socio-Economic Classification (Rose and Harrison 2014). It was defined using information on current job for those in employment or last job for those not in employment. I assigned those who never had a job (about 10% in the analysis sample) to their partner’s class, if married or cohabiting, or to class origin if not married nor cohabiting. For statistical robustness reasons, the 9 ESEC categories were collapsed into 5 categories: higher salariat (large employers, higher managers/professionals), lower salariat (lower managers/professionals, higher supervisory/technicians), higher grade white and blue collar workers (intermediate occupations + lower supervisors and technicians), petit bourgeoisie (agriculture and non-agriculture small employers and self-employed), working class (lower sales, service and clerical workers + lower technical + routine occupations; reference category).

The control variables at micro level should be exogenous or antecedent to class. For that reason, I selected only age, gender, years of education, family circumstances (married or not), and class of origin. I did not include unemployment status because it can act as a mechanism mediating class and attitudes. I excluded income, which is a highly correlated and inherent component of class, as well as political orientation (left-right self-placement) because it is likely endogenous. The total number of valid cases for all variables is 56002.

At the macro level, the focal independent variable is income inequality, as measured by the Gini index (0-100 scale) of individual disposable income (source: World Income Inequality Database 3, see

UNU-WIDER 2014). As income inequality can be associated with other macro-economic conditions that may affect attitudes to redistribution, I introduced in the analysis other variables as controls, namely GDP per capita, last year percentage change in GDP, expenditure on social protection benefits (as % of GDP), and unemployment rate (sources: World Bank and International Labor Organization databases). For further robustness tests of my analyses, I used an index of ethnic fractionalization provided by Alesina et al. (2003) and variables created from country aggregation of individual level EVS items (beliefs about the causes of poverty and interpersonal trust).

The data have a hierarchical structure (individuals nested within nations), so I analyzed them using multilevel linear models (Gelman and Hill 2007). Since I assume a varying effect of class across countries, as a function of income inequality, I specified random intercept and random slope (class) models with additional cross-level interactions between class and income inequality (and other macro-level variables). In this way, I test the hypothesis that class differences in attitudes are affected by income inequality. At the same time, the variance of class coefficients across countries can be accounted for.

## Results

Before presenting the output of multilevel regressions, it is useful to look at simple descriptive results. Scatterplots of mean difference scores in attitudes against the Gini index give first indications of a *negative relationship* between class differences and income inequality. The attitude gap between the higher salariat and the working class, for instance, decreases as income inequality increases (Figure 1a). Similar pictures can be seen for the other class differences (Figure 1b, 2a, 2b).

[FIGURE 1 AND FIGURE 2 HERE]

Moreover, the mean score of people in manual occupations increases (i.e., becomes more pro-meritocratic) with raising inequality (Figure 3a), while the mean score of the higher salariat is not correlated with inequality (Figure 3b).

[FIGURE 3 HERE]

However, these initial findings must be confirmed by multivariate multilevel models. The first model includes only micro level control variables, random intercept and random class slopes (table 1). Findings clearly support the first hypothesis that people in higher classes are more supportive of the meritocratic stance than the egalitarian one. The strongest contrasts regard the higher salariat and the petit bourgeoisie, that on average differ by 0.54 and 0.40 score points from the working class (reference category). The lower salariat and people in higher grade white and blue collar occupations also hold less egalitarian positions than people in manual occupations, although to a lesser extent. The random part of the model (the variances of class coefficients) indicates that the effect of class varies substantially across country, especially the higher salariat and petit bourgeoisie slopes, thus supporting the second hypothesis.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

Model 2 added the Gini coefficient and its cross-level interactions with class dummies. The coefficients of the interaction terms are all *negative* and significant, meaning that class differences in attitudes become *smaller* as inequality rises. Substantively, given the observed range of values of the Gini index, this corresponds, for instance, to an expected change in the higher salariat coefficient from about one to zero or less. Moreover, the variance of class coefficients is substantially reduced (i.e., statistically explained) with the introduction of cross level interactions. It should be also noted that the main effect of the Gini coefficient is positive and significant. In interpreting this result, it should be borne in mind that, in a model with interactions, its effect is relative to the reference category of class (the other class dummies being equal to zero). Thus, the positive main effect means that *working class attitudes become less egalitarian as inequality increases*. By changing the

reference category of class, the main effect of Gini is never significant and actually very close to zero (results not shown), meaning that the shrinkage of class differences with inequality is due to the working class becoming more similar to the higher salariat and the petit bourgeoisie, rather than to a convergence in attitudes between classes (see Figure 4).

[FIGURE 4 HERE]

This result, however, could be an effect of other country characteristics correlated with inequality. One of the most likely candidates is social protection expenditures: more egalitarian nations tend to spend higher percentages of their GDP on social protection measures. In model 3, I added social protection expenditures (% of GDP) and its interactions with class dummies. It turned out that the effect of income inequality on class differences remains practically unchanged, with the exception of the coefficient of Gini\*higher salariat which drops slightly (from 0.06 to 0.04, model 3). When the other macro variables (unemployment rate, GDP, GDP growth) were also included, one at a time (models 4-6) or all together (model 7), the main and interaction effects of income inequality changed very little, although it should be noted that with only 44 level-2 units (nations), models cannot support more than few macro variables.

### *Robustness checks and further tests*

In order to test the robustness of my results, I performed a series of further controls and introduced other possible factors in the regressions that might explain the relationship between income inequality and class differences in attitudes. As regards the controls<sup>6</sup>, I restricted the analysis to employed people, excluding those who were unemployed or not in employment. Subsequently, I excluded three

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<sup>6</sup> All controls were performed independently from each other.



countries that caused outlier results in class coefficients (Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Georgia) and added a dummy variable for ex-socialist countries and interactions with class coefficients. Then, I used the EGP class scheme instead of ESEC, and I defined class at household rather than individual level (i.e., taking into account partner's class relative to the respondent). Finally, I included in the model political orientation (self-placement on the left-right axis), a variable that, although potentially endogenous, could affect the relationship between class, attitudes, and income inequality. None of these controls significantly or substantively altered my results. It is worth mentioning that the control for former socialist countries highlighted that class differences (especially between the higher salariat and the working class) decrease in countries that experienced socialism. Nonetheless, the relationship with income inequality remains the same.

As regards other macro level explanatory factors, I first considered beliefs about the causes of poverty (Alesina and Glaeser 2005). In cultures where poverty is considered an individual outcome caused by laziness and lack of willpower, income inequalities are more easily justified. By contrast, where inequality is viewed as the result of social injustice, redistribution is more accepted. EVS data contain a question on the causes of poverty<sup>7</sup>. The country level correlation between the (collective) belief in social injustice as a prime cause of poverty and income inequality is mildly negative (-0.45). However, when introduced in the regression at the macro level and in interaction with class, this variable did not help to explain class differences in attitudes to redistribution<sup>8</sup>.

Another factor found to be correlated with redistribution is ethnic fractionalization. In highly ethnically heterogeneous countries, those who are more in need and who would gain more from redistribution often belong to ethnic minorities. Working class people from the ethnic majority would

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<sup>7</sup> The question is: "Why are there people in this country who live in need? Here are four possible reasons. Which one reason do you consider to be most important?" (unluckiness, laziness and lack of willpower, injustice in our society, inevitable part of modern progress).

<sup>8</sup> Given the number of level two units (44), all further tests were carried out by adding variables to model 2.

be thus less inclined to support redistribution favoring ethnic minorities. If ethnic fractionalization correlates with inequality, that could help to explain the puzzle. I included Alesina et al's (2003) index in my analyses as main term and in interaction with class. Ethnic fractionalization was found to be weakly correlated with the Gini index (0.33) and here again the relationship between income inequality and class differences in attitudes remained unaltered.

Finally, I took into account interpersonal trust at the aggregate level as an indicator of social cohesion<sup>9</sup>. The underlying reason is that more egalitarian societies tend to be more cohesive (Wilkinson 1996), as shown by the negative correlation between Gini index and social cohesion ( $r = -0.45$ ). Lower social cohesion might testify to a lower disposition toward solidarity which in turn undermines support for redistribution among all social classes. Also in this case, including aggregate interpersonal trust in the model did not change my main results about the relationship between income inequality and class differences in attitudes to redistribution.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

This study revealed two key findings: 1) class differences in attitudes to redistribution fade out where inequality is higher; 2) the shrinkage of class differences is attributable to people in manual occupations becoming more similar to people in higher classes (i.e., less egalitarian, more meritocratic). The first result was foreshadowed in previous studies, although within a quite restricted number of countries and a more limited variation of income inequality. This study confirmed the relationship between income inequality, class, and attitudes, and made it even more paradoxical by showing that the people most (theoretically) interested in redistribution become less favorable

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<sup>9</sup> The indicator derives from the classical question: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?"

precisely when they would need it most. It also showed that in certain country contexts class does not, as expected, matter for attitudes to redistribution, whatever the reasons behind this fact. So the explanatory value of a class analysis for attitudes to redistribution is not universal, but probably confined to certain societal contexts (i.e., economically advanced market democracies). This remark is not intended to dismiss the usefulness of class analysis in general, but to circumscribe its scope of useful application.

It should be borne in mind that the findings presented here are robust to the control for other macro-economic features of the national contexts (social protection expenditures, unemployment rates, GDP per capita, and GDP growth), as well as other non-economic features such as beliefs in the causes of poverty, ethnic fractionalization, and interpersonal trust (as indicator of social cohesion). However, one limitation of this study is its cross-sectional design (for a discussion see Schmidt-Catran 2014). Unfortunately, previous EVS waves did not measure respondents' class position (as well as education or social origin) in a very consistent way, thus preventing a rigorous longitudinal test.

Andersen and Curtis (2015) found a pattern of results similar to that shown here, although using a different dependent variable, and interpreted it in the light of the Meltzer-Richard model. They assume that in more unequal countries more people, from different classes, are adversely impacted by inequality and as a consequence, class attitudes become more similar. One objection to this reasoning is that the Meltzer-Richard model considers differences in income rather than differences in class, and the effect of inequality in market income rather than disposable income. Moreover, Andersen and Curtis, following Rueda and Pontusson (2010), argue that rising inequality also persuades those who would benefit less from redistribution that the latter is desirable in order to avoid the negative and visible consequences of inequality such as higher crime rates, poor educational attainment and widespread mental problems. However, this reasoning does not hold for my results, since I showed that there is convergence on more meritocratic orientations *by the working class*, not a convergence on egalitarian positions by the higher classes. That is why I believe the puzzle is still

to be solved, and that solving it calls for taking other societal or cultural characteristics potentially associated with inequality into account. A full examination of likely factors is beyond the scope of this article, nonetheless it is possible to explore a few of them and to put forward some conjectures.

One possibility concerns social mobility. There is evidence (Andrews and Leigh 2009) that the latter is lower where income inequality is higher. If that is the case, then workers could demand more meritocracy as a consequence. Also, inequality does not need to be associated with *actual* social mobility, it is sufficient that it correlate with *perceived* social mobility. If individuals believe that they live in “the land of opportunities” (Alesina and La Ferrara 2005), they are not likely to care about inequality, and differences in attitudes between classes will be lower. Moreover, what really matters is the interpretation that actors give to processes of social mobility. If greater inequality comes with interpretations of social mobility as exclusively the outcome of individual effort and capabilities, the role of the state in granting equal opportunities for all is likely to be diminished and class differences in attitudes to become lower.

This type of interpretation can be powered by political actors, the media, or other intermediate bodies which frame public debate and articulate public issues in ways that give more or less pronounced class character to the topics under discussion. It is the mechanism of political articulation mentioned above (see theoretical background) and suggested by Edlund (2007) and Svallfors (2006). In the same vein, it could be conjectured that political discourses against redistribution, or “the general revival of laissez-faire economics as a popular ideology” (Weakliem and Adams 2011), spread just where inequality grows larger and such discourses may affect all classes, not only those naturally more inclined to pay attention to them. This might be particularly true of former communist countries undergoing the transition to a market regime (Gijsberts 2002).

The same mechanism of legitimation of inequality, however, can be enacted by certain traits and values of the national cultures. Cultures emphasizing the importance of individual effort in achieving economic success and security can lessen class differences in attitudes, and are likely to be more

widespread in more unequal countries. For example, Duru-Bellat and Tenret (2012) found that meritocratic perceptions and belief are more frequent in more unequal societies, as a meritocratic ideology is probably needed to retain social cohesion. Income inequality itself can be perceived and judged rather differently across nations (Forsé and Parodi 2007, Weakliem, Andersen and Heath 2005, Weakliem and Biggert 2013). As suggested by Sachweh and Olafsdottir (2012), perceptions of high levels of inequality do not automatically translate into stronger egalitarian demands; it depends on prevailing social justice norms (Lübker 2004). Moreover, income inequalities are more accepted where they are also perceived to be greater (Gijsberts 2002, Hadler 2005, Janmaat 2013, Osberg and Smeeding 2006). Thus, the link between class, attitude, and objective inequality might depend on the prevailing interpretations given to the latter. Of course these are all hypothetical mechanisms which need rigorous empirical testing, and this leaves room for further investigation.

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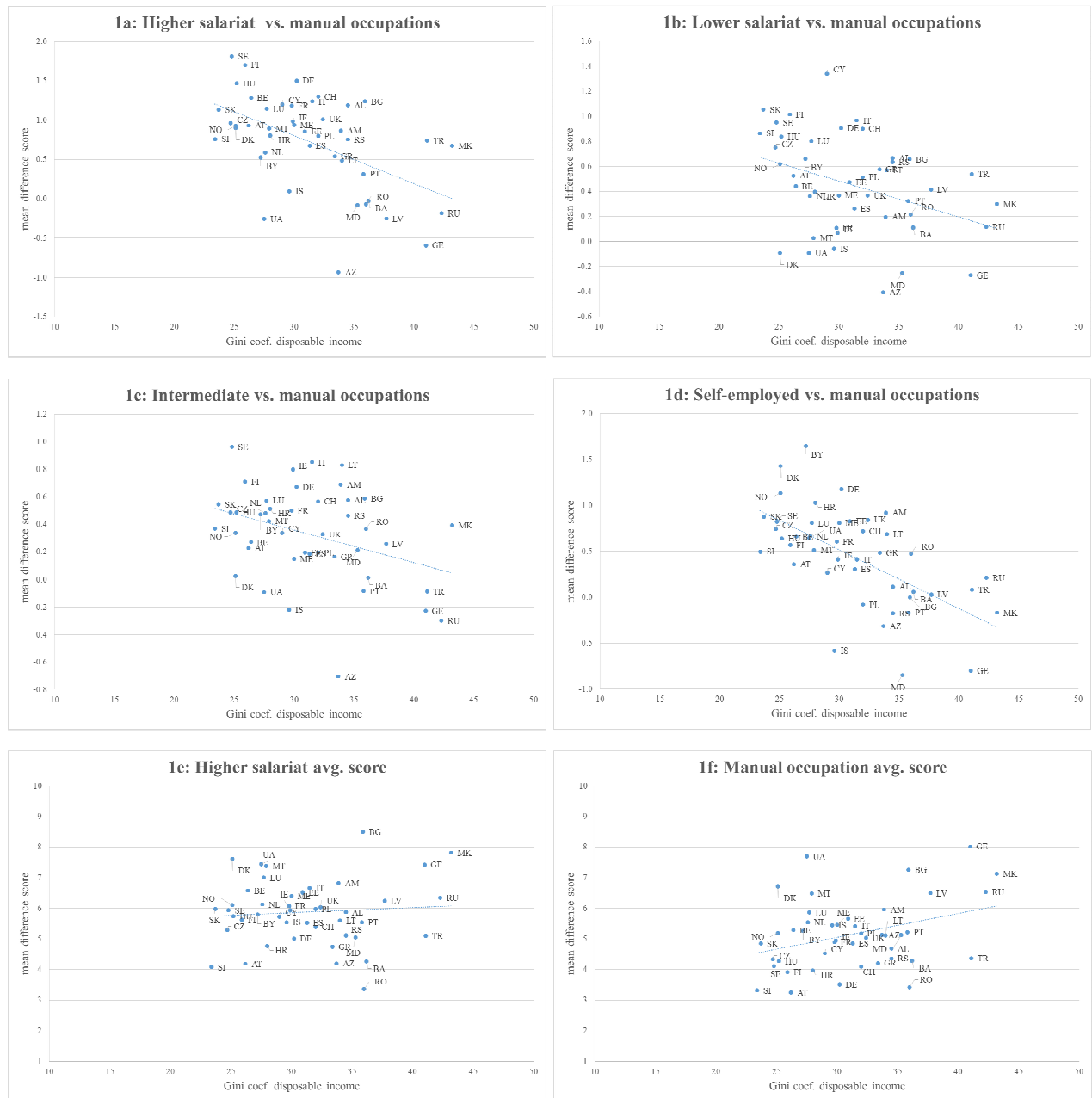
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## Graphs and tables

**Graph 1. Class differences in attitudes and income inequality. Scatterplots of descriptive results**



**Graph 2. Effects of class by level of income inequality**



Notes: Fitted values derived from model 2. Higher scores indicate increasingly less egalitarian and pro-meritocratic positions.

**Table 1. Results from hierarchical multilevel models for attitudes to redistribution**

Fixed effects	B		SE		B		SE		B		SE		B		S E	B	S E	B	S E	B	S E
	5,1	7	5,1	0,1	5,1	0,1	5,1	0,1	5,1	0,1	5,1	0,1	5,1	0,1							
Constant	7	0,18	6	7	6	7	7	7	6	7	6	7	16	17							
Higher salariat	<b>0,5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0,5</b>	0,0	<b>0,5</b>	0,0	<b>0,5</b>	0,0	<b>0,5</b>	0,0	<b>0,5</b>	0,0	<b>0,5</b>	0,0							
Lower salariat	<b>0,3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0,3</b>	0,0	<b>0,3</b>	0,0	<b>0,3</b>	0,0	<b>0,3</b>	0,0	<b>0,3</b>	0,0	<b>0,3</b>	0,0							
Intermediate	<b>0,2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0,2</b>	0,0	<b>0,2</b>	0,0	<b>0,2</b>	0,0	<b>0,2</b>	0,0	<b>0,2</b>	0,0	<b>0,2</b>	0,0							
Self-employed / small empl.	<b>0,3</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>0,4</b>	0,0	<b>0,4</b>	0,0	<b>0,4</b>	0,0	<b>0,4</b>	0,0	<b>0,4</b>	0,0	<b>0,4</b>	0,0							
Age	<b>0,0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0							
Female	0,1	6	0,1	0,0	0,1	0,0	0,1	0,0	0,1	0,0	0,1	0,0	0,1	0,0							
Years education	<b>0,0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0							
Married Class	<b>0,1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0,1</b>	0,0	<b>0,1</b>	0,0	<b>0,1</b>	0,0	<b>0,1</b>	0,0	<b>0,1</b>	0,0	<b>0,1</b>	0,0							
origin: high	<b>0,0</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0							

Class														
origin:	0,1		0,1	0,0	0,1	0,0	0,1	0,0	0,1	0,0	0,1	0,0	0,0	0,0
middle	4	0,05	4	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	5	5	15	05
Class	-		-		-		-		-		-		-	
origin:	<b>0,1</b>		<b>0,1</b>	0,0	<b>0,1</b>	0,0	<b>0,1</b>	0,0	<b>0,1</b>	0,0	<b>0,1</b>	0,0	<b>0,</b>	0,
missing	<b>0</b>	0,05	<b>0</b>	5	<b>0</b>	5	<b>0</b>	5	<b>0</b>	5	<b>0</b>	5	<b>10</b>	05
			0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,	0,
Gini			9	4	9	4	8	4	8	4	9	4	08	04
Gini*high			-		-		-		-		-		-	
her			<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,</b>	0,
salariat			<b>6</b>	1	<b>4</b>	1	<b>8</b>	2	<b>5</b>	2	<b>6</b>	1	<b>06</b>	02
			-		-		-		-		-		-	
Gini*low			<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,</b>	0,
er salariat			<b>3</b>	1	<b>3</b>	1	<b>3</b>	1	<b>2</b>	1	<b>3</b>	1	<b>03</b>	01
			-		-		-		-		-		-	
Gini*inte			<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,</b>	0,
rmediate			<b>3</b>	1	<b>2</b>	1	<b>3</b>	1	<b>2</b>	1	<b>3</b>	1	<b>03</b>	01
Gini*wor			-		-		-		-		-		-	
king			<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,0</b>	0,0	<b>0,</b>	0,
class			<b>7</b>	1	<b>6</b>	1	<b>7</b>	1	<b>6</b>	1	<b>7</b>	1	<b>07</b>	02
Social														
protectio			0,0	<b>0,0</b>							0,0	<b>0,0</b>		
n exp.			1	<b>3</b>							2	<b>3</b>		
Social														
prot.*higher			0,0	0,0							0,0	0,		
salariat			3	2							1	01		
													-	
Social prot.*lower				<b>0,0</b>	0,0							0,	0,	
salariat				<b>0</b>	1							01	01	
														0,
Social					0,0	0,0						0,	0	
prot.*intermediate					1	1						00	1	
Social														
prot.*working				0,0	0,0							0,	0,	
class				1	1							00	02	
														0, 0,
														0 0
Employment rate								0,0	0,0					1 4
Unemp.*								1	3					
higher				0,0	0,0						0,0	0,0		
salariat				2	1						2	1		
Unemp.*lower					0,0	0,0							0,	0,
salariat					0	1							01	01
Unemp.*interm					0,0	0,0							0,	0,
ediate					1	1							01	01
Unemp.*worki					0,0	0,0							0,	0,
ng class					1	1							02	01
														0,
														0
GDP per capita									0,0	0,0			0,	0
GDP*high									0	1			00	2
her						0,0	0,0				0,0	0,0		
salariat						1	1				0	1		
														0,
GDP*lower										0,0	0,0		0,	0
salariat										0	0		00	0
GDP*int								0,0	0,0				0,	0,
ermediate								0	0				00	00

ranking	0,0	0,0	0,	0,
class	1	0	01	00
GDP			0,0	0,0
growth			0	3 00 04
Growth*	-	-		
higher	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0
salariat	5	2	3	2

0,0 0,0 0, 0,  
2 1 02 01

-	-		
0,0	0,0	0,	0,
2	1	02	01

-	-		
0,0	0,0	0,	0,
2	1	01	02

Level 2  
random  
effects  
(variances)

0,	1,	0,
2	1	2
4	2	3

			1,2	0,2	1,1	0,2	1,1	0,2	1,1	0,2	1,1	0,	1,
			9	8	1	4	2	4	0	4	0	23	11
Constant													
Higher salariat	0,2		0,1	0,0	0,1	0,0	0,1	0,0	0,1	0,0	0,1	0,0	0, 0,
	8	0,07	8	6	5	5	7	5	6	5	3	5	11 04
Lower salariat	0,1		0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0, 0,
	0	0,03	8	2	8	2	8	2	7	2	7	2	07 02
Intermedi	0,0		0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0, 0,
ate	7	0,03	5	2	5	2	5	2	5	2	4	2	04 02
Working class	0,1		0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0, 0,
	9	0,07	8	3	7	3	7	3	7	3	7	3	06 03

[illegible]



		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0
Married	<b>0,13</b>	3	<b>0,13</b>	3	<b>0,13</b>	3	<b>0,13</b>	3	<b>0,13</b>	3	<b>0,13</b>	3	<b>0,13</b>	3
		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0
Class origin: high	0,09	5	0,09	5	0,09	5	0,09	5	0,09	5	0,09	5	0,09	5
		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0
Class origin: middle	<b>0,14</b>	5	<b>0,14</b>	5	<b>0,14</b>	5	<b>0,14</b>	5	<b>0,14</b>	5	<b>0,15</b>	5	<b>0,15</b>	5
	-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0
Class origin: missing	0,10	5	0,10	5	0,10	5	0,10	5	0,10	5	0,10	5	0,10	5
				0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0
Gini		<b>0,09</b>	4	<b>0,09</b>	4	<b>0,08</b>	4	<b>0,08</b>	4	<b>0,09</b>	4	<b>0,08</b>	4	
		-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0	
Gini*higher salariat		<b>0,06</b>	1	<b>0,04</b>	1	<b>0,08</b>	2	<b>0,05</b>	2	<b>0,06</b>	1	<b>0,06</b>	2	
		-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0	
Gini*lower salariat		<b>0,03</b>	1	<b>0,03</b>	1	<b>0,03</b>	1	<b>0,02</b>	1	<b>0,03</b>	1	<b>0,03</b>	1	
		-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0	
Gini*intermediate		<b>0,03</b>	1	<b>0,02</b>	1	<b>0,03</b>	1	<b>0,02</b>	1	<b>0,03</b>	1	<b>0,03</b>	1	
		-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0	-	0,0	
Gini*working class		<b>0,07</b>	1	<b>0,06</b>	1	<b>0,07</b>	1	<b>0,06</b>	1	<b>0,07</b>	1	<b>0,07</b>	2	
					0,0								0,0	
Social protection exp.				0,01	3							0,02	3	
					0,0								0,0	
Social prot.*higher salariat				<b>0,03</b>	2							0,01	1	
					0,0							-	0,0	
Social prot.*lower salariat				0,00	1							0,01	1	
					0,0								0,0	
Social prot.*intermediate				0,01	1							0,00	1	
					0,0								0,0	
Social prot.*working class				0,01	1							0,00	2	
							0,0						0,0	
Employment rate					0,01	3						0,01	4	
						0,0							0,0	
Unemp.*higher salariat					0,02	1						0,02	1	
						0,0							0,0	
Unemp.*lower salariat					0,00	1						0,01	1	
						0,0							0,0	
Unemp.*intermediate					0,01	1						0,01	1	
						0,0							0,0	
Unemp.*working class					0,01	1						0,02	1	
								0,0					0,0	
GDP per capita							0,00	1				0,00	2	
								0,0					0,0	
GDP*higher salariat							0,01	1				0,00	1	
								0,0					0,0	
GDP*lower salariat							0,00	0				0,00	0	
								0,0					0,0	
GDP*intermediate							0,00	0				0,00	0	
								0,0					0,0	
GDP*working class							0,01	0				0,01	0	
										0,0			0,0	
GDP growth										0,00	3	0,00	4	
										-	0,0	-	0,0	
Growth*higher salariat										<b>0,05</b>	2	<b>0,03</b>	2	
Growth*lower salariat										-	0,0	-	0,0	

										0,02	1	0,02	1
										-	0,0	-	0,0
Growth*intermediate										0,02	1	0,02	1
										-	0,0	-	0,0
Growth*working class										0,02	1	0,01	2

Level 2 random effects (variances)

			0,2		0,2		0,2		0,2		0,2		0,2		0,2
Constant	1,29	8	1,11	4	1,12	4	1,10	4	1,10	3	1,11	4	1,12	3	
			0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0
Higher salariat	0,28	7	0,18	6	0,15	5	0,17	5	0,16	5	0,13	5	0,11	4	
			0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0
Lower salariat	0,10	3	0,08	2	0,08	2	0,08	2	0,07	2	0,07	2	0,07	2	
			0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0
Intermediate	0,07	3	0,05	2	0,05	2	0,05	2	0,05	2	0,04	2	0,04	2	
			0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0		0,0
Working class	0,19	7	0,08	3	0,07	3	0,07	3	0,07	3	0,07	3	0,06	3	